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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development**

# Written statement* submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 May 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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# Graduate Women International Recognises Secondary School as a Means to Eliminate Child Marriage

Graduate Women International (GWI) recalls the Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution 32/20 (2016), *Realizing the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl*, that recognises education as a multiplier right that empowers women and girls to make choices to claim their human rights, including the right to education. Child marriage is a reality for more than 12 million girls each year with estimates indicating that, if current trends continue, more than 150 million girls worldwide will be married by 2030.[1] GWI, concerned that child marriage contributes to the multiple and intersecting obstacles that limit girls' access to education, upholds that child marriage disrupts a girl's life trajectory, decreases her opportunity for economic independence and destroys her right to self-determination.

Education is one of the greatest losses incurred by child marriage and one of its most promising recourses. Current developments in the reduction of child marriage are encouraging but GWI reiterates the critical importance of girls' completing secondary school. We suggest that primary schooling is not sufficient to counter the effects or discourage the practice of child marriage. The World Bank forecasts that for each year of secondary school completed a girl reduces her likelihood of marrying before the age of eighteen by 5% or more in many countries.[2] As advocates for the advancement of the status of girls, GWI promotes education that builds a stable foundation that leads to an alternative to early marriage. Ending child marriage through access to secondary education must be brought to the forefront of States' policies as a means to fortify girls' futures. We call on States to address the lingering dissonance between policy and action on girls' education as a means to end child marriage. In addition to government's oversight of the implementation of policies, GWI also recognises the significance of a bottom-up approach whereby grassroots leaders and communities together make a commitment to eliminate child marriage through education.

The World Bank estimates that child marriage will cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030; for example, early marriage reduces women's earnings in adulthood by nine percent[3]. Endling child marriage will improve States' economies. Child brides are more likely to drop out of school than their peers who marry later. This, in turn, greatly impacts their ability to contribute developmentally as well as financially to their lives, the lives of their children and their community. As alluded to above, girls who complete secondary education are up to six times less likely to marry young compared to girls with little to no education[4]. GWI emphasizes that education increases a woman's expected earnings and the welfare of her household. GWI appeals to States to embrace the fact that ending child marriage is not only just but will increase a woman's expected earnings in the labour market. Child marriage not only affects a girl's opportunity to contribute to her country's economy but also challenges her right to autonomy.

Child marriage robs girls of their autonomy before it is even legally granted to them. Early marriage deprives girls of the opportunity to choose their partners which leads to life -long consequences for their physical, mental and emotional health as well as the potential for harm to their children. Child marriage undermines self-determination. GWI emphasises the urgency of this situation and highlights the role education can play in improving girls' independence and freedom of choice.

As part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which went into effect in January 2016, countries around the world agreed to a target of ending all child marriage by 2030. GWI is optimistic about States beginning to recognise

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1 "Child Marriage Is a Violation of Human Rights but Is All Too Common." *UNICEF DATA*, data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/.

2 "Educating Girls, Ending Child Marriage". http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage

3 Education for Global Development, a blog about the power of investing in people. https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/psd/rippling-economic-impacts-child-marriage

4 Brookings Institute: Today's Challenges for Girls Education.

the value of collaborating with non-government organisations (NGOs) and other non-State stakeholders whose expertise in child marriage is an untapped resource that can contribute to achieving the 2030 Agenda.

As example, GWI is encouraged that the President of Niger has stated that child marriage will no longer be tolerated in Niger where the legal age of marriage for girls is currently 15. This announcement has the potential to change the lives of millions of girls. We are also encouraged about changing norms in India where villages, one-by-one, are pledging to become child- marriage free. Through a travelling music and puppet show community leaders, parents and children are made aware of the harmful effects of child marriage in a way that people of all ages can understand. After the show, villagers take an oath that they will keep their village child marriage free, then they sign a banner which is then put up in the village to hold everyone accountable. The campaign to make villages child -marriage free has reached almost 200 villages in the Thar desert and more than 49 villages are currently free of child marriage.[5] Additionally, GWI calls attention to Japan's Civil Code that will set the minimum age of marriage at 18 for both women and men. If passed, the law, which the government supports, would take effect in 2022[6]. In Switzerland, both chambers have voted to increase jail sentences to a maximum of five years for people found guilty of coercing others into a marriage. The law is to apply regardless of whether the marriage was agreed to outside Switzerland[7]. Each of these examples demonstrate the political will necessary for States to meet Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 to end child marriage.

Child marriage puts the education of women and girls at great risk, yet education is the best defense against the perpetuation of the practice itself. GWI recommends the Council to:

- Urge and support States to conduct comprehensive awareness raising programmes in collaboration with NGOs and all sectors of society including the civil society organisations, media, parents, caregivers, religious leader and community elders including those with specific responsibilities towards children on the life-restricting aspects of child and forced marriage.
- Develop a National Action Plan specifically to eliminate child marriage that includes employing additional female teachers.
- Remind States of their commitments made by adopting, in December 2016, the second resolution on child, early and forced marriage and of their obligations to all Universal Human Rights Instruments[8].
- Urge States to include an update on their progress towards ending child marriage in their national reports to international treaty bodies and in the universal periodic review.
- Strongly encourage States to enact and strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of each partner and to raise the minimum legal age of consent to 18 years.
- Engage Parliamentarians who are key players in ending child marriage, as they can lead the development of relevant legislation and policies, set the political agenda as opinion leaders on ending child marriage, pass budgets, monitor implementation, and ensure accountability for both national and international commitments, including government accountability.
- Create programs related to the achievement of SDG 5.3.
- Institute adequate safeguards to ensure that parental consent or other exceptions (including a consequence of rape) are not used to force girls into marriage.
- Ensure that registration of application for marriages is strictly enforced.

- Provide support and assistance for victims of child and forced marriages to obtain medical, psychological and other assistance including educational opportunities.

5 Girls Not Brides. https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/villages-india-going-child-marriage-free/

6 Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/21/japan-moves-end-child-marriage

7 Swiss Info. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/21/japan-moves-end-child-marriage

8 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/UniversalHumanRightsInstruments.aspx